

SARANJAAM

*Sæ · ræn · dʒəm*

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## **ABSTRACT**

It was only during my second year of MFA studies at York University that I decided which film I wanted to make for my thesis project. I had faced several setbacks in my first year of Masters studies – some of which help guide me towards understanding where I should be focusing my creativity for my thesis. These setbacks left me well behind my classmates' progress, but in the end, my process has brought me to a rewarding place in the development of my artistic voice.

I started out making a very different thesis film also about my Iranian identity and roots, but not about my parent's immigration process to Canada. I came to realize that my parents' story and their series of actions folding and unfolding entailed more than just a process, that leads to an explanation as to why so many people get to a point in their lives where continuing a simple life is no longer an option, regardless of their past. Knowing this was my parents', I often found myself pondering about what is the prerogative of any story's subject to create their own story and make it cinematic. I recognized in their story a parallel for my own artistic growth, as I tried to author the arc of my own artistic growth. Identity and interpretation quickly became the backbone of my film and when writing the script, I asked myself, "What is my role with respect to the events and scenarios that occurred? What is the role of the filmmaker in constructing such identities?" While writing the script, it was integral to me to clearly draw the boundary that delineated the factual from the fictitious. I had to avoid separating myself from the events through too much artistic license; I had to make sure my characters continued to exist within a large margin of reality as events actually unfolded. I hope I succeeded.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Max Armstrong. *Maxi*, above your talents and passion for the art of cinema, you are now much more of a colleague and a cinematographer to me. I want to thank you for taking my story to heart and approaching it professionally, giving it everything you had.

Many thanks go to all the crewmembers of *Saranjaam* who put in countless hours out of their summer to help me make this film. A special thanks to Matt Greyson for your patience and the extra set of hands you brought onto the set to help me out. I love working with you and would love to have you as my 1<sup>st</sup> A.D. anytime!

I would like to thank Laurence Green and Tereza Barta for your knowledge, countless support, dedication, guidance and most of all, compassion you had by pushing me in so many different levels and directions to see multiple possibilities for *Saranjaam*.

## **DEDICATIONS**

To my brother,

I am deeply grateful for your endless love and unwavering support.

Above all, I dedicate this film to my parents, who trusted me with their story. Words cannot explain my gratitude towards your endless and countless support.

Thank You.

*“The Secret of change is to focus all of your energy,  
not on finishing the old, building the new”*

- SOCRATES

## **TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT.....	II
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	III
DEDICATION.....	IV
QUOTE.....	V
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	VI
1. INSTIGATION.....	1
2. RESONANCE.....	4
3. CONTEXT.....	9
4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT.....	11
5. CONSTRUCTING CHARACTER.....	16
6. CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY.....	19
7. MEMORY.....	23
8. REPRESENTATION.....	25
9. FILMING.....	27
i. Appendix.....	30
WORKS CITED.....	42
FILMOGRAPHY.....	44

## 1. INSTIGATION

It was the spring of 1998 when my parents started the spring-cleaning around the house when this thesis film was actually first born. Tradition has it that at the commencing of the Persian new year (*Norooz – translating to A New Day*) on 21<sup>st</sup> of March, which is equivalent to the first day of Spring, Iranian families clean up around the house, which also symbolizes getting rid of the old and bringing in the new. It was a relatively warm sunny day, when my parents decided to go through some old items they had stored in a corner of our apartment's balcony.

I remember while helping out and making piles of which items to keep and which ones to get rid of, I caught a glimpse of a grey plastic bag stuffed in a cardboard box. I peaked inside the box and saw that it contained some audiocassettes. The label on one read *Dec. 1995 – Immigration Court*. I suddenly became very curious as to what those tapes were when my mother quickly asked me to put the cassettes back into the bag, and put them in the box with the items we would keep, as they were very important, she said.

I did not get to see that plastic bag again until we moved to our current house in 2000. I was in the garage one day, cleaning my bike, and as I was looking around for the air pump, I came across that same plastic bag in that keepsakes cardboard box again. My sense of curiosity was triggered once more. I knew my dad kept a cassette player around the garage somewhere, so I went looking for that, instead of the air pump.

Once I found what I was looking for, I brought the keepsakes box inside the house and randomly popped one of the cassettes into the player. I anxiously waited and listened. At first, I was not able to distinguish the words, or what was happening. It was hard to

interpret what was going on and the meaning of what I was listening to. All I knew was that it sounded like an official court session and an important one too, based on what my mother said that spring day, two years earlier. Although the continuous droning hiss of white noise from the analogue tape was louder than the people talking in the background, in the distance I started hearing my father's voice speaking in Farsi. There was also a translator who was translating what my dad was saying for the judge and the panel members. There were questions being asked, mostly focused on my dad and his past in Iran.

The officials were questioning why my dad had escaped from his home country. Why was he detained in the revolutionary court? Why had the Iranian government authorities shown an interest in him? Why was Canada his chosen final destination? I immediately found myself drawn into the session, not just for its personal relevance, but because of the drama at play. I also became fearful and concerned, and for a second it felt as though I was the subject of the questioning in the court. I could tangibly feel the very hostile, cold dreariness of the court and its officials.

It was at that moment when I began to think that maybe those tapes could provide an excellent resource for the transcripts I might be able to adapt into a film. I went through the other tapes and organized them based on date and content. I began to understand what had happened to my parents during the course of the three court sessions, and throughout their immigration experience. Though I could feel the eagerness swelling in me, to bring those dramatic moments back to life on the screen, at the same time I was not able to spend a great deal of time on this personal project at that time, as I



was still in school and had other deadlines and obligations. So I decided to put this family project aside and come back to it at the right time.

As I have said, I applied to graduate school and spent the first year of my M.F.A. at York pursuing a different thesis, and it was not until my second year of graduate studies that I considered going back to those tapes. I wanted to first transcribe and document the content of the tapes and then to use my parents' story as the basis of my thesis project. However, at that time, in 2011, sadly and much to my surprise, I found out that by then, my father had destroyed the tapes! He claimed that he was no longer comfortable with those tapes sitting around the house since they contained a lot of personal information about our family and he still felt this was a security risk. To this day, I believe that it was not what the tapes contained, but more so their physical existence that resonated a sense of fear and neglect for my father. Thus, by destroying them my father was able to let go of his past and in turn accept the changes he had gone through to embrace a new life abroad.

## 2. RESONANCE

I have always been attracted to realistic dramas, stories that have a great level of intellect and meaning embedded in them, stories that leave the viewers thinking, and connecting with their past and the common experiences they share with the filmmaker and characters. Stories that have deeply rooted subject matter, especially those based on true events, can leave an imprint on the viewer. This could be as a result of psychological factors triggered within the viewer, such as echoes of personal experiences, which in turn create high levels of empathy or personal attachment for the viewer, to the subject matter. This notion of common or shared feelings, triggered by past or relevant episodes in one's life, this is what interested me about my parents' story, and I hoped I could create a sense of familiarity and personal connection within the viewer.

In making *Saranjaam*, I hoped that capturing and expressing the events of the Shahabi family's saga would trigger an empathetic response in viewers, especially Iranian families, and those who have escaped the Middle East who might have a particularly strong connection to the experience depicted. *Saranjaam* is a story based on my parents experience going through the legal immigration procedure in Canada as results of past events in their home country, Iran. Therefore, it was important for me to set out to tell my story within a framework of literature theories. The works of Carle E. James in "*Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Race, Ethnicity and Culture*", which is based on Martha Nussbaum work were quite critical and influential to my work. Furthermore, as means of identification, I had a very personal connection to the story, since it was the adaptation of my own family's story, and I know that so many Canadians have

immigration stories in their family histories. In such a multicultural country, the focus on immigration has always been a popular subject that unfortunately lurks in the background of the lives of many Canadians, and many immigrants around the globe. I hoped to make a film that would connect with all people who have witnessed or experienced similar complicated ordeals of immigration, left with angry and bitter thoughts, who have refused to speak of those traumatic moments or their personal or private memories.

I knew from the beginning of this project that *Saranjaam* would be more meaningful to the Iranian viewer than the non-Iranian, but I hoped to bridge that gap and speak to a wider audience. Immigration is an experience that thousands of Iranian families have endured, first hand, or like me, second hand. For many of us, immigration to another country was their only choice or means of escape from a corrupt government. Michel Bruneau states, “...*Yet, what constitutes one of the great strengths of diaspora studies and migrant transnationalism, namely its reflexivity of agency and processes, also needs to be brought to bear upon the understanding of broader issues of social change and transformation. Take the changing landscape of organisational and institutional structures guiding societal change...*”<sup>1</sup>

Relating with imagination, one of Carle E. James frameworks, I was able to use a visual metaphor, which reoccurred within the story. I have always been interested in usage of the bokeh. Bokeh, being the technical terminology used in photography derived from the literal idea of “bokeh of flowers” identifies with soft blurry objects in the

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Bruneau - “*Diasporas, transitional spaces and communities*” © Rainer Bauböck, Thomas Faist / Amsterdam University Press 2010

background with in a photograph. For me this was a tool to directly connect with the memories that are being recalled from Amir's past and in turn passing by. Every bokeh is connected visually with a metaphor of a memory that is recalled and passes by.

In making *Saranjaam*, my main concern was to create a film that my parents and their fellow Iranians could understand and associate with, so they were the first tier of my target audience. I chose, however, not to revisit the trauma directly, and not to recreate horrible and bitter memories in the Iranian viewer, rather to remind them of the absolute injustice and inhumane situation some of them had to experience at some point in their lives, in order to finally settle in a land they call their second home.

Not to sound too patriotic, but Canada, for Iranians like my parents, represented a new home where democratic rights protects, and is in favor of the people. While I was interested in portraying the difficulties many families face before they leave, those tapes lead me instead to focus on the feelings of immigrants when they are torn away from their homeland, and are forced to start from zero in the most alienating circumstances and try to understand the bureaucratic and legal maneuvers they face, as well as other hostilities, and even racism. But as William Julius Wilson has shown, many of the behaviors that are associated with inner-city poverty are a consequence of the historical effects of racism, continuing de facto racial segregation, failing schools, structural shifts in the economy, and high rates of joblessness.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Knopf, 1999). Also see Douglas S. Massey and Nancy A. Denton, *American Apartheid*:

It was important for me to find ways to include these other layers, and this resulted in some of the “fictionalizing” to which I referred, earlier, an example of which is the violent encounter the main character faces with the street thugs the night he is out delivering pizza.

I was initially reluctant to make Canada the iconic, heroic welcoming country that offers the safe haven for so many immigrants. My parents’ experience was a little different. Canada has also played host to many circumstances in which the Canadian government was accused of unjust and partial undertakings in the cases of many immigrant families and individuals who came from Muslim nations, especially those escaped and seeking refuge, in the aftermath of 9/11<sup>3</sup>. However, my parents’ experiences pre-date these tensions, and I was hesitant to tackle the complexities of insinuating something out of the ordinary, in those other, more recent, and sensational cases. My references for *Saranjaam* were the audiocassettes of the court sessions my parents had gone through, and yet even in those cassettes, one was able to hear traces of the latent racism and suspicion that would so publicly emerge after 9/11 in the questioning of my father. The clear sound on the tapes at one point of one of the immigration officers snoring through the session was prominent and disturbing. I did not incorporate that detail into *Saranjaam*, since it might detract from the main focus of the subject matter, but I tried to hint at such indifference and misunderstanding while concentrating mainly

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*Segregation and the Making of the Underclass* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> The Secret Trial Five.  
<http://secrettrial5.com>

on the events that my father had gone through during that time, as he struggled for a better life for his family, especially for his children.

### 3. CONTEXT

Politics play a significant role in the lives of many refugee families who choose to escape from their homeland to another place for shelter and safety. In *Saranjaam*, both politics and religion are key elements that ultimately lead the Shahabis' to flee Iran's post-1980 Islamic, revolutionary regime.

As I listened to my father telling me the reasons why the Iranian government was so interested in arresting him and interrogating him, it quickly became concretely evident to me that, in his case, it was more than just the obscene accumulated political matters of the post revolutionary period, it was also the gruesome gesture of high-ranking religious figures wearing the masks of politicians, and imposing their dictatorial notions upon the people of Iran. My father's resulting goal was a simple and pure one: he sought a country with a secular democratic ideology, something that unfortunately was not possible at that time in Iran, and faced too many obstacles to flourish for Iranians in their homeland. "*Muslim Diaspora in the West*" written by Professor Haideh Moghissi, of Sociology and Women's Studies at York University, Toronto, argues that "...the premise that diasporic communities of Islamic cultures, while originating in countries dominated by Islamic laws and religious practices, far from being uniform, are in fact shaped in their existence and experiences by a complex web of class, ethnic, gender, religious and regional factors, as well as the cultural and social influences of their adopted homes..."<sup>4</sup>

After the 1979 revolution, Iran was an uncontrollable explosive volcano with its own timetable for eruption. The number of political prisoners was increasing by the hour with

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<sup>4</sup> Muslim Diaspora in the West. Negotiating Gender, Home and Belonging. Edited by: Haideh Maghissi and Halleh Ghorashi. Ashgate Pub Co (December 2010)

the new Islamic Republic government. The promise of the newly appointed religious leader Khomeini was: "*I will give my people their dignity back,*" a dignity that was stolen from the Iranian people during the corrupt era of the Shah and what he had bestowed upon the Iranian people for decades. The Shah was able to easily hide and camouflage his thievery between claims of modernizing Iran and increasing western influence.



#### 4. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In order to better understand the reason behind most of these emigrations motivated by political and religious reasons, it is important to first understand the history of Iran. Here is my attempt to illuminate some of what the Iranian people went through prior to the 1979 revolution, which is partly responsible for this uncontrollable volcanic eruption nearly 35 years later.

Iran has oil, and lots of it! In the 1950s, there were numerous unsuccessful attempts by various Iranian politicians to prevent Iran from pursuing a route that would inevitably cause the country to be controlled by the West. Until '*Mohammad Mosaddegh*,' one of the secular democrats who was elected prime minister in 1951 nationalized petroleum, and removed its credit from U.S. and British holdings the ownership of the oil was in a state of imbalance. Mossadegh's bold nationalization move created economic balance for the first time in Iran, and brought prestige to the Iranian people, and this lead to high level of international economic status for Iran and for the people of Iran!

This period of national pride was short-lived however, and Mossadegh's government was overthrown and he was deposed in 1953 in a coup d'état orchestrated by the CIA and British MI6. This coup brought to power the rule of Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, who was the second and last monarch of the 'House of Pahlavi' in the Iranian monarchy. The West's intensions were to overturn the regime and bring back foreign oil firms and foreign ownership to Iran.

Muhammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, educated in the West, was under the claws of the western super powers and indeed, strived to portray his country as a super power existing in the Middle East. The White Revolution, advised by the U.S. brought with it a series of economic, social and political reforms with the stated intention of transforming Iran into a global power, and modernizing the nation by nationalizing industries and granting women suffrage.<sup>5</sup>

The resulting clashes within the social classes as the rich became richer, and the poor suffered meant that the political and social conditions in Iran progressively deteriorated. This slowly became evident all over Iran and internationally through the 1970s. Moreover, in the mid 1960's an iconic religious cleric, *Ayatollah Khomeini*, was sent into exile from Iran to Najaf in Iraq by SAVAK, the Shah's secret police services and later in 1978 to France. His exile led to an era of torture and fear amongst all Iranians as more crackdowns from the Shah's secret police became common. Iranians disapproved Shah being a puppet of the non-Muslim Western power whose culture was affecting that of Iran and wanted him out.<sup>6, 7, 8</sup>. Many underground parties began to form who opposed the Shah and his westernized influences and sought to turn Iran into a liberal backlash to social injustice.

While Ayatollah Khomeini was in exile in France, he began to communicate with the people of Iran, mostly students, with his anti-Shah and anti-western speeches that were recorded and illegally smuggled into Iran. The tapes were played amongst the

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<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad\\_Reza\\_Pahlavi](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammad_Reza_Pahlavi)

<sup>6</sup> Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini* (2001).

<sup>7</sup> Shirley, *Know Thine Enemy* (1997), p. 207.

<sup>8</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions* (Princeton University Press, 1982)

Iranian people during religious and student gatherings, making them believe that the Shah's ideology was in fact destroying the very essence of Iran. Most importantly, Khomeini preached that revolt, and especially martyrdom, against injustice and tyranny was part of Shia Islam,<sup>9</sup> and that Muslims should reject the influence of both liberal capitalism and communism, with such slogans as "*Neither East, nor West – Just Islamic Republic!*" As underground parties began to quickly emerge and gain more power, the name of Khomeini also became more prominent. People began to accept him, as a person, and as a leader, as Iran's leader in exile! Thus after the continuous saga of betrayals, killings and enragement targeting agonizing mostly the Shi'ites Muslims, "...demonstrations against the Shah commenced in October 1977, developing into a campaign of civil resistance that was partly secular and partly religious, and which ultimately intensified in January 1978..."<sup>10</sup> In 1979, the people of Iran staged a revolution, which overthrew the Shah, and accepted the Ayatollah as their united religious leader.

Iran was now an out of control inferno. In the events that lead to the revolution, there were strikes and demonstrations in streets all over the country, at any given time of the day, mainly between August and December 1978. As a result, the "Iran" that was once known as the haven for the western countries in the Middle East became a paralyzed country. The Shah left Iran for exile on January 16, 1979 as the last Persian monarch,

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<sup>9</sup> The Last Great Revolution Turmoil and Transformation in Iran, by Robin WRIGHT.

<sup>10</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, 'Mass Protests in the Islamic Revolution, 1977–79', in Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash (eds.), *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press (2009), pp. 162–78.

leaving Iran in a state of complete chaos. Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran to be greeted by Millions. On April 1, 1979 Iran was turned into ‘The Islamic Republic of Iran’ through a national referendum, where Khomeini became the supreme religious leader.

However, the new regime that was so desired by millions of Iranians soon began to take its toll. From 1979 to early 1983, Iran was in a “revolutionary crisis mode” which meant that there were guerrillas and rebel troops loyal to the Shah still in Iran and fighting to undermine the new regime. Score settling, death squads, financial crisis, peasant rebellions, and disgruntled military attacks created even more chaos and disorder<sup>11</sup>. Hundreds of people would be executed or killed in an over night attacks, against those thought to have affiliations with the Pahlavi dynasty, plotting counter-revolutionary measures or spying for Israel. The number of casualties grew to an estimated 30,000 by early 1980’s. Many ordinary people started to be scrutinized by the new Islamic regime, and came under surveillance or were taken into custody with no apparent grounds for arrest, as did my father. Interrogations, hypocrisy, theocracy and home invasions began to rise. The number of deaths began to stagger uncontrollably. After Shah being overthrown, Khomeini began to advertise theocracy in Iran based on Guardianship of the Islamic Jurists.

Thirty odd years after the revolution, Iran is still under possibly the heaviest and most notorious mafia-affiliated henchmen, who are dedicated to the Islamic extremist religious leader, Ayatollah Khamenei. Over the past 34 years, many families from all

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<sup>11</sup> Arjomand, *Turban* (1988), p. 191.

over Iran, mainly the Iranian 1980's baby boomer generation, have either escaped or immigrated to other countries for a better, secure and safer lives. My family was amongst the many who had to take a risk of illegally escaping Iran in 1994, in the hopes of finding refuge in Canada, most importantly, to provide a better future for my brother and I.

## **5. CONSTRUCTING CHARACTER**

The character trait I mostly sought to associate with my main character, Amir, is his slow and reluctant arrival at rebuilding his sense of trust, once he is in Canada, which is drawn directly from my father's experience, and also is definitely the theme I intended to underline my plot in *Saranjam*. The series of events my main character has endured in Iran have eroded all vestiges of his ability to trust anyone, and the exhausting experience he faces once in Canada, leaves him feeling betrayed and lost again, ultimately unable to re-establish any trust in anyone around him. In turn, Amir becomes a very isolated and lonely man, embodying an inverted persona. In the film, I try to suggest that the excruciating events in Iran have profoundly affected Amir, negatively and traumatically, and his mental state bears the scars of those experiences, leaving him in a state of insecurity prior to his immigration to Canada. This state, for the main character, creates an emotional distance between Amir and his wife Maryam, which the couple must overcome. Furthermore, the lack of progress of their three failed court sessions through the Canadian immigration system further exacerbate Amir's crippled ability to trust anyone, and cause him to lose faith, even further. He becomes paranoid.

With such circumstances weighing on both Amir and Maryam, it is quite obvious that both are suffering from extreme alienation, on many levels, especially Amir. I attempted to first demonstrate Amir's state of mind, right after the failed court scene when the Shahabis are having a moment of tragic realization together outside of the courthouse. Both lost in despair and confusion, Amir and Maryam are discussing their response and next strategies when Amir dares to say that he believes the Canadian

Government must be thinking of them as a threat. This traumatic experience of being failed by their lawyer and translator expands to not just the Government officials or Canada or even other Iranian people around him, but his distrust reaches into his own personal life, including his wife, as she is somehow made to feel that she, too, is failing him.

I wanted my character of Amir to always portray a distinct level of insecurity and I pushed to have that as his character spine. This, in turn, allowed me to further complicate his psychological motivation to save himself and his wife with the possibility that he, himself, and his state of mind, is partly responsible for their failure to easily navigate the immigration process. At the time when I first spoke with my father, I noticed the more he continued with his recollection of the events that took place back in Iran, the more I became aware that “trust” was becoming a relevant and reoccurring theme, for him, in his story. It quickly dawned on me that the reason for my father’s loss of trust was linked to all the betrayal felt by many Iranians who lived through these historical incidents in the nightmares of the 1970s and 1980s. Locals in Iran were betrayed by their governments, and the system, but also by their families, their colleagues and in some cases, by their best friends.

According to my father, due to the circumstances at the time in the 1980s and early 1990s, betraying him was a life or death choice for his friends, the regime made it so that Iranians had to betray their friends to survive, to save themselves. When many Iranians of my father’s generation were arrested and heavily interrogated, the only way out for them was to make themselves appear to be in agreement with the new regime.

Losing their friendship with my father seemed to be of very little value or importance to them, when faced with threats to their lives. My father, on the other hand, responded differently, and would not pledge allegiance to the new regime, nor did he compromise his sense of loyalty. He felt the consequences, though, of when others did.

In making *Saranjaam*, I tried to highlight several themes that inevitably rise in immigrant families, especially those fleeing political persecution. Regardless of how personal this film is to me, I hope that many other viewers, not just Iranian-Canadians, can connect with *Saranjaam* on many levels, through this theme of compromised and rebuilt trust that inevitably accompanies the experience.



## **6. CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES**

In the process of writing the script, my desire to focus the film on my parents' struggle with immigrating to Canada lead me to eliminate the existence of my elder brother, (who was born in January 1979 just after the revolution had slowly come to bitter end, and myself, born in May 1984 during the early years of rebuilding Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini's regime.) This way I could focus the drama around my parents, otherwise the complexity of the drama would have escalated, disallowing me to focus on just one story. Also, I was very interested in showing the story the way my father had initially described it to me that made it resonate in me, which focused on his own experiences, particularly with my mother. My understanding is that in a nuclear family in the Middle East, with children, the father figure becomes emasculated, as the importance of the mother's role can threaten to eclipse that of the father, because of the family's focus on the children. For this reason, and others, I kept my brother and I out of the parallel Shahabi family, and I tried to keep Amir as the dominant figure in the relationship.

The subplot in *Saranjaam* revolves around this notion of male emasculation. In essence another layer to *Saranjaam* is Amir's ineffectiveness and failure to be the "man" or the "provider" for his family, especially as they face the challenges of gaining a foothold in Canada. As we get to know more about Amir, we slowly find the clues as to why and how he was deprived of his male role and identity. Indeed, it is hard enough to be the male character in a family, let alone being from a culture where the man is revered as the dominant figure and sole provider of the family.

I purposely wanted to draft the situation so that Amir's status or authority is questioned and diminished. I wanted him to be deprived of his male power or traditional role and his identity as the strong provider. By doing this, I was able to inject the story with a secondary narrative, as Amir repeatedly rejects female support, or expertise or leadership. This provides another dimension to this theme of trust in the story and leaves Amir struggling to resolve his inner conflicts with his new surroundings, where the tenets of the old culture no longer apply or succeed. By empowering Maryam to take action, she seems more adaptable to the new cultural mores and independently makes the decision, against her husband's wishes, to speak with Shilla Rabbani, the court stenographer, to try to secure their success at the appeal. This female progressivism is difficult for Amir to embrace, and he resists until the choice is ultimately taken away from him. Maryam embodies the couple's fear of deportation more tangibly than Amir, and her fear of what they might face back in Iran is very real. While Amir's single-minded focus is on overcoming the bureaucratic obstacles in Canada, until the news of Maryam's pregnancy finally disarms Amir, and he is forced to place his fate in women's hands.

Shilla's character, the court stenographer, is partly based on true details in my parents' struggle with the Canadian authorities, and the inadequate translation they initially received. But also partly she is a product of this emasculation theme I sought to develop. Shilla's character, along with Maryam's, deepens the subplot of female progressiveness. With the introduction of her character, both Maryam and Shilla are able to come together and collectively take charge and make the decisions, which ultimately secure the success Amir and Maryam seek. In a way, it takes two female supporting

characters, to manipulate and overpower the dominant male figure who has cast himself as leader.

My reasoning for introducing gender politics as a subplot to my film comes from the notion of male control/power, which exists in most Middle Eastern cultures – more so from my own experiences that I have encountered throughout my extended family. Unfortunately, this controlling position for the male has come to a point where the male loses control of his responsibilities, thus priding himself as the “leader” which pushes the family to extremes. There are many reasons, both cultural and religious, as to why this notion propagates. I was very interested in proving this idea wrong, and establishing the idea of male emasculation that inherently portrays the female role as a savior in my film. By doing so, I was hoping to make a remark towards this old tradition and to some extent to its sexist, anti-feminist ideology.

Moreover, I wanted to clearly indicate that Iranian families are not all consumed under the male empowerment, and indeed, respond positively to the feminist movement that has been progressively rising within the Iranian society with respect to gender roles, and mostly its religious implementations. Furthermore, I wanted to hint at the power of the female in an Iranian household that has been reluctantly diminished by the harsh westernized criticism. Although male empowerment is still eminent in Middle Eastern cultures, I wanted to respond to the westernized media for generalizing the Middle Eastern family under the male dictatorial power.

In addition to the female characters that introduce a new dynamic to Amir’s character and the character relationships, Mohsen, the pizza shop owner, also has a very

important role, although seen for just a fraction of the film. He is like a guardian, like a protector who tries to articulate Amir's delicate state and degenerating emasculated power. Mohsen's character has more effectively navigated the transition into Canadian society, but also shares some history with Amir, while exuding patience and wisdom. Mohsen's character represents where Amir's character needs to be, one day, perhaps not professionally, but personally. As viewers watch the scene in the pizza store, I hope they are exposed to what Mohsen's true colours, in terms of his generosity and compassion, but also find the clues to Mohsen's motivation and what he means to the story. As a small business owner, selling pizzas, Mohsen may seem to be a simpleminded businessman, but I tried to write in some subtleties and complications in how he relates to Amir and the other employees so that his character functions effectively in the film. Mohsen's character represents a level of realism that Amir must finally attain, so he is a kind of foil for Amir as he navigates the chaotic foggy situation in his stressful situation. Amir cannot focus, or make clear moral decisions. Mohsen's guidance is exactly what Amir needs to manually return to a mentally safe state, where he can gain control of his and his family's situation and begin to make proper decisions. The money Mohsen hands the broken Amir indirectly empowers Maryam to act, and gets Amir's family to where they need to be.

## 7. MEMORY

In the midst of constructing this representation of the lost documented recording of my parents' experience, I had to face the challenge of how the fallibility of memory would function and intensify the narrative. Memory seemed to play a role at every layer of the film's representation. My question was how do I portray my character's memory in the first place. This film is essentially a recollection of memories, scripted to capture my "representation" of how I interpret those memories. Because the tapes were destroyed, I lacked the original transcript of the trials, and had to rely on my parents' memories. My second question was how I might incorporate the very element of memory in *Saranjaam*? I did not want to make a documentary or a docudrama, nor did I want to make a film that just dealt with memories. It was very important to me to tell this story in a dramatic format. This way I sought to enable myself to incorporate elements of memory as fragmented scenes interrupting the linear narrative sequence of the film. The fragmentation allowed me to portray how memory is interpreted in reality. One's memory can be triggered in many different ways, from the slightest glance at an object, or the faintest smell, to the subtlest hint at a word or phrase, any of these can all trigger fragments of detailed memories. I wanted to play with this process throughout Amir's journey. Representing his memory in fragments was an artistic method to construct a hinted tactic of suppression on his part, as he coped with haunting recollections of his fear, torture and trauma in *Saranjaam*.

It was my decision to construct the narrative in such a way that allows the viewer to experience the memory sequences as they occur to Amir, as resurfacing fragments of his

nightmare experiences, not as events playing out in chronological order. I do not start the film in Iran, with what happened to Amir there, but insert fragments or hints of that experience as they recur to him, subjectively. For this to work, I stylized my shooting and ensured all of the bus sequences were blown out, in terms of exposure, by at least 2 stops, outside the bus. This visual effect and brightness came from my father's recollections as he explained his experiences and the interrogation after he'd been accosted on the bus. As he explained:

*...later that day I was on the bus coming back home. For some reason everything seemed much more brighter than usual. The inside of the bus seemed much brighter than any other day.*

## **8. REPRESENTATION**

One of the central and constant challenges in making *Saranjaam* was how best to handle the idea of representation. For me, representation is a notion of conscious cognitive experience, where one calls upon past memories or others' experiences and characterizes those moments or experiences again at a later date with one's own personal unconscious interpretation. In essence, the role of Shilla, was based loosely on my own interpretation of my imagined contents of my father's lost tapes, and he was drawing, in interview, on memories from almost 20 years ago. Like Shilla, I am in the role of translator, to the screen, and we are both trying to represent the immigration experience, me, to my audience, from my parents' history, and for Shilla, the Shahabis' desperate need for legal Canadian status, communicated to the immigration committee.

Like Shilla, my goal in translating my father's experiences involves me striving for a level of accuracy and truth, but unlike Shilla, I have also engaged in fictionalizing parts of the story, so it is clear that my version differs somewhat from what my parents really experienced. Shilla attempts to correct the inaccuracies in her predecessor's translation of the Shahabis' experience, and I can never be sure about how accurately my father's recollections might have paralleled what was on those tapes, or fully know how much my parents see themselves in my version of their experience in *Saranjaam*.

It was difficult for me to finalize which route to take when writing the story. Whose story should I tell? From whose perspective should I tell it? I still remember quite vividly, right after my presentation at York's graduate symposium in December 2011 on my plans for *Saranjaam*, when a number of fellow students made various remarks, some

embracing a film from my mother's perspective, others advocating a film from Shilla's perspective, some suggesting I focus only on what happened in Iran, others wishing the film would only take place in Canada. Although ultimately, I chose my father's perspective, it is still refracted through my interpretation of my father's experience, so consequently Amir's perspective is refracted through other points of view.

I was also conscious of the fine balance I needed to strike between propagating and dismantling stereotypes of the immigrant and the immigrant experience embarking on a new life abroad. Although the ending of *Saranjaam* seems cliché, as everything works out for the characters and their expected child in a happy ending, I hope that my intended reflections on individualism, gender relations, the importance of family and race throughout, are what stay with the viewer. In *Saranjaam*, the quest for security, male empowerment, religion and socio-political freedom all relate and correspond to real universal human needs.



## 9. **FILMING**

Saranjaam, pronounced, as *Sæ · ræn · dzəm* is Farsi for “at the end”. I wanted the title to be purely Farsi and have no Arabic influences in its spelling or meaning. Saranjaam was chosen because the story is moreso about the idea of what really happens to the Shahabi’s at the end of the day.

I was critically conscious of how I wanted the frame the events as they unfolded. In the filming of *Saranjaam*, my main idea of capturing the events was simple. I wanted the frame to speak for itself. This was a challenge for my cinematographer Max Armstrong and myself. Having a cinematography background, myself, I often found myself constructing the shot list with many angles for coverage. Similarly, Max wanted to have all of the shot-reverse shot set-ups covered. However, as I began to work on my visual research, I began to notice that many Iranian films (at least the notable ones) fall under the concept of minimalism. The idea of telling a story through the *mise en scene* with the least camera movement or flamboyant interference, just letting the action unfold in front of the camera, that seemed to be an Iranian preference. But I did not want to make a film that was like watching a theatre play.

The recent Iranian Best Foreign Film Oscar winner, *A Separation*, directed by Asghar Farhadi (2012) became a dominant film influencing me as I prepared to shoot my visuals. As a matter of fact, I also referred to Farhadi’s other film *About Elly*, 2009 for further visual inspiration. Farhadi places the camera in such intricate places for moments in the drama that his viewer becomes so drawn into the action that we almost forget about the camera. I hoped my viewers would be as immersed in my film, although I did not

want my viewers to feel like they are watching a theatre play, but rather an Iranian film. Furthermore, Farhadi's dramas are aided by outstanding performances from some of the best-known Iranian actors, and these performances sweep the viewer into the drama so we lose track of the "film" dimensions. It all becomes too real, as if we are partly experiencing the action!

In the same way, Farhadi's subject matter is very real, and that realism is what draws viewers so deeply into a connection with his films. Of course, this was my goal too and I tried to keep this imperative to my craft while making *Saranjaam*. Devising a subject for my film that the viewer can relate to on so many levels is the golden key to my filmmaking ambitions.

Other cinematic influences included films such as, *Monsieur Lazhar* and *Hiroshima Mon Amour*, both excellent films capturing the essence of identity, replacement and representation. The immigration sequences in *Lazhar* were influential to constructing the opening and ending sequences of *Saranjaam*. I became very fond of the flat, monotonous dreary tones I was able to work out with my art director to further help me emphasize the dullness of the immigration court room which in fact later became helpful to further aid the exenteration of how Amir felt during the hearings. For this reason I chose to capture the opening sequence of the immigration hearing in colder tones to insinuate the exact feeling Amir was going through and contrast them later in the film with much warmer tones as they received their immigrant status.

The idea of having the protagonist battle with his past quickly became a theme I was very interested in experimenting with. *Monsieur Lazhar* represents a scenario that

positioned the protagonist in a binder that portrayed his difficulty within the social norm and contrasts it with his past political and private issues. I was able to construct a similar storyline with Amir in *Saranjaam*, placing him in a scenario where his past continually haunted him and in a way made him dysfunctional deviating him from his surrounding.

The idea of using flashbacks and intercuts to Iran was not for the sake of style, but rather to allow to position the viewer within Amir's psyche, which was mostly associated with fears. It allows the viewer to associate his past fear with the present fear as well and in fact introduce a notion of sympathy for him.

While shooting *Saranjaam*, I became increasingly comfortable with the wide shot, for the first time in my career. I would initially shoot the master, and if I was happy with the performance(s), then that was the shot I ended up using. Working on the *mise-en-scene* in relation to the action became more important to me, and I discovered that showing the entire action from a wide shot would often work best, and would also reinforce the realism of the drama, rather than cutting often to close-ups and then shot-reverse shot conventions.

i. **APPENDIX** (Research Interview with My Father)

I was 27 years old, and lived in Shiraz, Iran. The year was 1978 and Iran was on the verge of a revolution. All Iranians young and old had one thing in mind – a revolution. Everyone was hopeful towards the revolution.

The Shah of Iran had not given the people what they needed. He didn't completely satisfy every Iranian. Therefore, people were looking for a change. This hopefulness amongst all Iranians was aided by an Islamic clergy, Khomeini, who had promised and said; "*I will give my people their dignity back*".

Iran went into a horrific gruesome revolution. It was now 1979 and three months after the revolution ended, the top authorities began eliminating individuals and groups who were against the new regime, which was now called the Islamic Republic of Iran. Many of the people who were killed were thought to be with the previous regime and or had different views or engaged in activities that were against the Islamic regime.

With all of the killings happening so promptly after the revolution, I thought that the country was going towards a worse stage. This was not the ideal regime the people of Iran were hoping for. However, a large number of the people of Iran also thought that the religious figure "Khomeini" was there to help them and guide them to a better life, through Islam and its fundamentalisms. When I saw the killings and all of the acts of

brutality, I began to think to myself, “if this man is like this right now, how will he be when he gains power and fame amongst the people?”

I made a vow to myself that I will not have any affiliation with this regime, and believed that anyone who were involved, would only be fueling the fire and aiding the corruption.

In the early 1980s there were several political groups that were either secretly or publicly active. Among them were *The Mojahedene Halgh*, *Komoleye Kurdistan*, *The Royalist*, and a few others. A small number of these groups were around where I worked. When I would speak to these people on different occasions, I would slowly come to a conclusion that each group was fighting only for their party, NOT Iran. For this reason, I proved to myself that involving myself with any one of these groups would only make my life difficult and complicated.

The year is now 1980; a year after the revolution and the Iran/Iraq war is soon to begin. Many political activities arose in Iran. With all of this, followed political hostage takings, an activism that quickly became popular in Iran. One of the largest and successful hostage takings in Iran was that of the 60 members of the American embassy in Tehran. The United States was in shock and helpless. Their attempts to make relations between them and Iran had failed miserably. The U.S. decided to fly into Iran with helicopters and secretly bail out the prisoners, but due to a catastrophic crash of two of the helicopters, that plan also failed. So the U.S. reverts to Iraq for help. They ask Saddam Hussein to

start a war with Iran. Since Iraq wanted war with Iran, they gladly accepted the proposition, and so began the Iran/Iraq war!

1988, marks the end of the war with Iraq and much of Iran's assets are gone to waste, with over two million casualties and deaths.

I was always in agony and perplexed to see my country like this. I could never understand how a few mullahs can bring such tyranny, corruption, and terror to the people of their own country.

If we had leaders that loved their own people, our country would never be in this state. I constantly thought about this matter. It latter became clear to me that the power of these mullahs was being fed by the people of Iran, my very own friends!

My way of thinking was quite different to that of the government, and mostly my friends. There slowly grew a gap that existed between others and me. This gap, though small, grew to a point that I was identified as a suspect against the current regime.

The start of my interrogations really began at my workplace where the HR would conduct basic routine interviews of their employees. They sent for me several times and questioned me. *Why didn't you participate in the war like your other bothers?*

*Why don't you participate in the daily prayers?,*

Because I couldn't tell them that my ways were much different than theirs, I found myself really struggling to find excuses as to why I wasn't participating in the daily prayers or why I wasn't in the war, etc...

My excuses and lack of cooperation got to a point that it became evident to them that my thoughts and beliefs were much different than theirs and the current state of the government.

They quickly assumed that if one is against the regime, therefore by definition they were against and were automatically involved with another political group.

Their motto was very loud and clear. You are either with us or against us. And for those who are against us, execution awaits you!

I tried very hard to clearly make them understand that I was not against their ideology but at the same time I alone, couldn't have the same thoughts.

My only way of survival was to cope with them, but also remember that they were different than me and not to let their thoughts penetrate my own ways.

The questionings continued and it did not look like they were going to end anytime soon. It seemed like they wanted to change me and my ways of thinking. They had said literally: "cooperate with us or die". Neither which was to my liking.

I decided that I couldn't live a normal life if this continued. I had to find a way to escape my country to rescue my family and myself.

## MY FATHER'S FIRST ATTEMPT ON LEAVE IRAN

I was at the *Mehrabaad* airport in Tehran ready to board my flight. My luggage was sent through and my passport was stamped, ready to go. As I was about to enter the gates to show my boarding pass, two unmarked officers interrupted the line and pulled me aside and began questioning me and asking for my passport. They turned out to be guards and told me that if I wanted my passport back, I should go to the revolution court and solve my issues. They took my passport and left me stranded at the airport!

Despite the fact that I had absolutely no connection or affiliation with the previous or current regime, I decided to go to the revolution court, solve my case, and see to the bottom of it!

The revolution court known for the deaths of majority of the Iranian political prisoners was regarded as one of the scariest, aggressive, oppressive, dangerous and ruthless courts in Iran. The idea of coming out of the court alive was always close to impossible.

It was a particularly colder day that morning that I went to the court. When I got to the court, I had to wait for some time. After a few hours of patiently waiting, they called out my name. A guard was there calling my name. When I replied to him he gestured me to follow him. He took me to a room and told me to wait for the judge who was on his way. I sat on the first row of benches and waited for the judge to arrive. It was close to noon as the judge walked in the room with three armed guards. He had a peculiar look to him. He had large heavy bags underneath his eyes. He had hatred buried deep into his eyes.



Right away he began to question me. He asked me several questions as to why I was leaving Iran with my family! Why I had sold my house and why I just left my work without any advanced notice? I was confused, because at the time I was just leaving Iran for a week, without my family, and my house was not sold, and I had informed my work place requesting a week off! That was their way of getting information from someone, to corner me and through wrong information, see my reaction.

As he questioned me more, I came to a strong realization that the majority of my best friends could not be trusted anymore, as they had clearly ratted me out. The judge had information about me that only my close friends would know about me. His questions were getting more intense and direct. Comparing this court to those in the movies, there would be a very clear and distinct difference. I couldn't talk at all. I wasn't allowed to speak for myself. In fact I had no rights to talk and no rights to have a lawyer. Furthermore, the judge would have the final say about everything.

I sat there and listened to the judge as he gave his final verdict. He said that I had to personally go to the intelligence services and speak with them to have them clear my record! Knowing that I was able to exit the court, I immediately accepted the judge's final decision and left the court. I couldn't believe that I had come out of the court alive. Now the only thing to do was to go to the intelligence services and clear my record!

The first time I went to the intelligence services, I quickly became aware of the fact that the revolution court wasn't such a bad place after all!

At the front door a soldier stood there and waited for a command to be given to him. The receptionist who then made a phone call to have someone send for me took down my name and asked me to wait. After an hour of waiting the soldier called out my name and asked me to follow him. He took me to a room and blindfolded and handcuffed me. I now couldn't see anything. We went for a lengthy walk until we reached another room. He told me that I was situated in the corner of a cell. He told me that a chair was a couple feet behind me and asked me to sit on it while still facing the corner with the blindfold still on. I was told that shortly a man would enter the cell and talk with me. Moments later I heard footsteps and the voices of a few men who entered the room. I was told that I couldn't speak until I was spoken to, and most importantly I do not at any point turn around!

I was scared and quite nervous. I had no clue as to what they wanted from me, or what they wanted to do with me.

They stood behind me and whispered a few notes to each other, and then one of them called out my last name and told me to remove my blindfold.

*"Mr. Jabbari, so I see that you have gone to the revolution court and have said that the documents we have compiled on you are incorrect? You really thought you could win your way out?..."*

*"...we just provided the courts those documents for the sake of providing written documents... you know how it works... paper work. But the truth of the matter is that we have gathered documents about you that prove that you are not with us. That you are*

*against this regime. That you are part of an external party. If and once all of this gets proven you're done!"*

I couldn't believe my ears...these guys were totally out to get me and they were looking for the smallest, weak point in me to take me down. They were just waiting for me to weaken and collapse. I noticed that they were throwing curve balls at me to see how I would react. So naturally, I tried to do anything in me to redirect this interrogation.

After that time, during the interrogation, I thought I was being questioned so that they could find information relating to my friends. My only concern was that they understood that I wasn't part of any party or group against the regime. I just wanted to have a regular simple democratic life. I just wanted to know and understand that everything I was telling them was simply just my personal beliefs.

Once they were done asking their questions, it seemed like they had come to a point that they could no longer get much out of me and that everything I was telling them was the truth! But they weren't quite ready to give up. So instead, they concluded that if I were to help them, they would help me and clear my record.

They wanted me to spy for them and gather intelligence information for them. They wanted me to spy on certain people. I quickly realized that this was a reoccurring cycle. This is how they had gathered information about me. They had my friends spying on me behind my back, and now it was my turn to do the same to them!

Before they left the room, they told me any information I gather for them is useful, and that I was to report to them immediately after gathering enough information.

I couldn't say much, so I remained quiet. They left the room, and the soldier who brought me there came in. He blindfolded me again and then walked me back to the reception.

After 8 months, the intelligence services had not contacted me, nor had I contacted them. I just had nothing for them. I just refused to participate in their game. I could not spy on anyone. It was not me. I just couldn't do it.

I remember quite clearly, it was a Thursday morning and I was on my way to work. For some reason I had a feeling, that something wasn't right. All day long I was having butterflies, and I just didn't know why. Later that day I was on the bus coming back home. For some reason everything seemed much brighter than usual. The inside of the bus seemed much brighter than any other day. I was looking at the people in streets pass by, where a well-dressed bearded man came up to me and asked me if he could sit beside me. At first I didn't know if he was talking to me so I did not look in his direction, but when I realized what was happening I glanced up at him. He was looking straight down at me with a slight smile. I nodded at him and shifted one seat over. He then tried to start a conversation with me. He talked about how it was such a good day. I wasn't completely in a talkative mood and didn't want to be rude or ignore him. I tried to make a conversation as much as I could. For a moment, we went quiet, but suddenly he asked what my next stop was going to be!

I told him the name of the next stop. He looked at me and thanked me but asked if I was going to get off at the next stop. I didn't know why he was asking me that. I told him that

I was going to get off in another few stops ahead. He looked at me and quite boldly with a little aggression, said "I think it would be a good idea if we get off the next stop!" He told me that and showed me his badge and gun from underneath his jacket.

I was so shocked and nervous. I had a quick look around and realized that there was absolutely no room to escape either. However, I had no choice but to agree. When the bus came to the next stop, I looked at him and by this time his tone was completely changed.

He grabbed my elbow and forcefully told me to quickly exit the bus and to not make any noise. As we got out of the bus together, he held me tight, took out his walkie-talkie, and made a call to his center. He told them that I had been captured and told them to send the cars. Within minutes, a couple cars quickly came to a stop and suddenly two military forces rushed out of the car and told me to get onto my knees as they handcuffed me and shoved me to the ground. A third car came to the scene. In the third car was a bearded man who seemed to be the commander. He asked the two guards to bring me closer to him. I was pushed and shoved to the third car. He opened the door and one of the guys aggressively pushed my head down and shoved me right into the car.

The bearded man pointed his rifle at me and told me that if I would make any noise I would die. Then he blindfolded me.

I got into the car and we drove away. For some time we continued driving until we came to our destination. Once there, I was escorted inside. I realized by the smell of the building that it was the intelligence services building that I was taken to before. This time I knew I was not in the same cell. The same three officers came inside. I could tell it was

them again by their voices. Again, I was forced to look at the corner of the cell and have my blindfold on.

As I stood there in shock and wondering why I was viciously kidnapped and brought here, one of the three officers, slowly crept behind me and suddenly began to attack me. He punched me in the face from the side and I fell to the ground, then he started to kick me in the head and stomach and my back. He wasn't stopping nor were the other guys going to stop him. He yanked on my hair and pulled me up on my feet. However, I couldn't stand straight on my feet, so I fell onto my knees. He began to slap and punch me, when suddenly one of the other two officers, said to stop and walked towards me. He pulled off my blindfold and told me to look at him and remember his face. I couldn't see anything at that point. He had a cigarette in his mouth. As he told me to never forget his face, he killed his cigarette by pushing it in several spots on my head. The burning feeling of the cigarette burning my scalp was the most excruciating feeling for me.

The two of them left the room as I lay there in grave pain. I couldn't tell why I was being beaten up and tortured like this. The third officer stood there, finished off some paper work, walked towards me, and told me to get up and leave. At that point I couldn't hear enough to make out what he was saying to me. He helped me stand up and offered me some water to drink. Instead he splashed my face with water to wake me up. He told me that "we are done with you" and that I could go, but he needed me to do them a favour before I left. He handed me a package and told me to read it and to contact them in a month. From what I could remember from what he was saying to me was that, they wanted me to start spying on certain individuals. In the package were photographs of

people they had suspicions about. He told me that if I didn't co-operate, what happened to me in the cell today would be done to my family and eventually they would kill us! I was given a couple weeks to read everything over and to start my spying!

I had to lie to my wife and tell her that I had gotten into an accident at work and that's how I ended up with the bruises.

A couple of days later, I went to the human resources at my work place, and requested to take all of my accumulated vacation days. I had about 6 months accumulated.

Later that week I bought my family and myself tickets to fly to Dubai for vacation. We left Shiraz on the 10<sup>th</sup> of March, exactly three days before my spying would begin and didn't come back!

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- **Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada**  
<http://www.irb-cisr.gc.ca/Eng/Pages/index.aspx>
- **Immigration and Refugee Protection Act**  
<http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/I-2.5/>

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- *"Monsieur Lazhar"* – Philippe Falardeau – (2011)
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### Iranian Cinema

- *"A Separation"* – Asghar Farhadi – (2011)
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